
Theater: *Honeymoon in Vegas*; Yankees Lose Again in October

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HONEYMOON IN VEGAS: THE MUSICAL ** 1/2 out of ****
BRONX BOMBERS * 1/2 out of ****

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PAPERMILL PLAYHOUSE

Screenwriter Andrew Bergman has an enviable track record. He burst onto the scene at 27 by co-authoring the screenplay to *Blazing Saddles* and quickly followed that with *The In-Laws* and *Fletch*, two of the most quotable comedies amongst aficionados. He's an idiosyncratic talent best at quirky asides and oddly timed, slow burn humor that gets under your skin. Sure, *The Freshman* was enlivened greatly by the presence of Marlon Brando parodying himself but you can see why Brando agreed to the project in the first place.

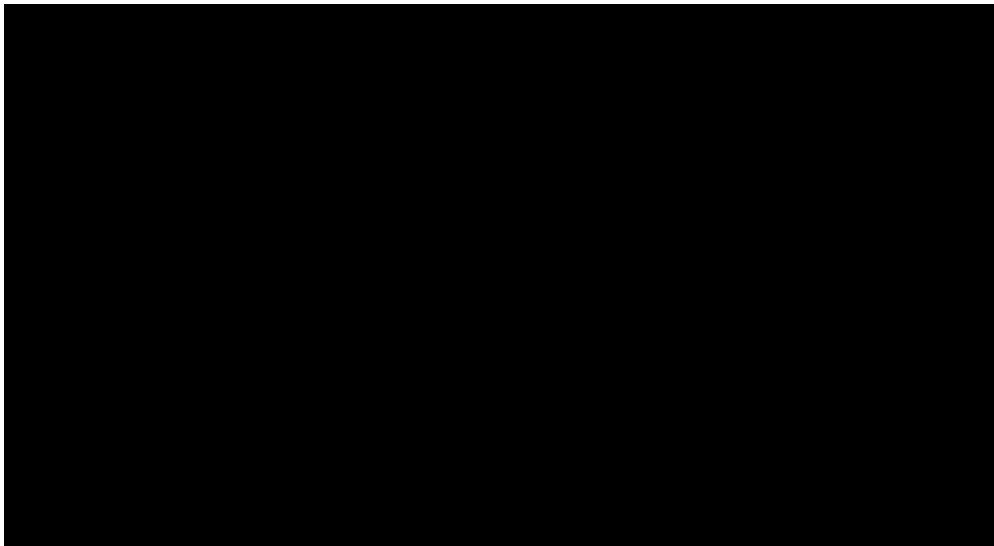
The broader goofiness of *Soapdish* and *Honeymoon In Vegas* have their charms, though the bigger his movies got, the more forced they became. The all-star cast of *Soapdish* -- a poor man's *Tootsie* in its loving mockery of life on a daytime soap -- actually works against the fun. Sally Field, Kevin Kline, Robert Downey Jr., Whoopi Goldberg: what fun such a list almost demands. But complicated hi-jinks are not Bergman's strong suit. Far better to have Matthew Broderick and Bruno Kirby trading gibes while wrangling animals. Or Peter Falk muttering to himself during *The In-Laws*. Essentially, Bergman is a miniaturist, a subtle purveyor of slippery comedy that circles around you and slowly squeezes out more and more laughter until you're giggling for no particular reason but just because that's the whimsical mood he's created.

So Bergman's films work best when they're small, not when *Honeymoon in Vegas* shows Nicolas Cage joining a parachuting team of flying Elvis impersonators. One other thing Bergman's movies have in common? They don't scream "musical!" Sure, some intimate musicals like *Once* work beautifully. But subtle musical comedies? Not so much.

Nonetheless, *Honeymoon In Vegas* has been set to song and it's an affable evening, a throwback to the days when musical theater sought nothing more than to entertain. However, they accomplished that in the old days with melodic songs, sparkling dancing and clever sets, three departments this show falls far short in.

Jack and Betsy are two Brooklynites who are crazy about each other, as Jack (Rob McClure of *Chaplin*) makes clear in one of the show's best songs, the opener "I Love Betsy." They've been together for five years, their friends are getting hitched and indeed everyone around them in multi-culti New York seems paired off.

So what's the problem? Well, Jack has a fear of commitment. Not the usual fear of getting bored but the genuine fear of the curse laid on him by his dying Jewish mother. "Never get married!" she forces him to promise, as we see in a flashback (introduced amusingly by the cast shouting out "Flashback! Flashback!") where his mother sings, "Never Get Married!" What exactly is she asking him to do? Never get married!!!! Any joke worth telling is worth telling three times, as Nancy Opel playing mother Bea makes clear in her death-defying death scene penned by the Borscht Belt-loving Bergman.



The show is two for two at this point, as the couple impulsively heads off to Vegas. But the warning signs are already there. The one-note set design by Anna Louizos has decided that a stone and wood theme will dominate. Sliding screens built from those two materials awkwardly represent the brownstones of Brooklyn, then absurdly represent the glitz of Vegas and finally and unconvincingly stand in as well for the lush paradise of Hawaii. Almost the sole concession to the change in scenery are palm trees that pop up from bushes when our lovers land in Sin City. The choreography by Denis Jones is similarly uninspired.

But we're distracted by the plot, which kicks into high gear. Betsy (a nondescript Brynn O'Malley admittedly in a nondescript role) is a dead-ringer for the dead wife of high roller Tommy Korman (Tony Danza). Before you can say "blackjack!," the groom to be is roped into a high stakes poker game and owes Tommy a cool \$60,000. Hey, you might go crazy if you were dealt a queen high straight flush as well. Tommy will forgive the debt if he can woo Jack's fiancée for the weekend. She's so incensed that Jack even mentions the possibility that she agrees to do it just to spite him. Before you know it, she and Tommy are off to Hawaii where he proves a charmer, Jack is following behind and true love may be saying "Aloha!" thanks to Tommy's millions and a beautiful mansion with an ocean view.

First, the good stuff. Rob McClure -- Tony-nominated for his turn in the otherwise forgettable *Chaplin* -- has an engaging, Everyman appeal. Indeed, one of the great glories of Broadway is that regular Joes like McClure and Norbert Leo Butz and Nathan Lane turn into big stars when you realize they can sing and dance and act. Anyone with talent can be a star, not just the matinee idols that dominate Hollywood and TV. I'm not quite sure how *much* star power McClure can deliver because the shows he's been in that I've seen are seriously flawed. But you can see why he's being cast.

O'Malley's role is so uninteresting, it may be unfair to say she doesn't deliver. But a Kelli O'Hara would have delivered the natural appeal that might make us care about their romance. In contrast, David Josefsberg has two minor turns as a Wayne Newton-style performer and the leader of the Flying Elvises. But he makes the most of them, delivering the modestly naughty "When You Say Vegas" with amusing, Rat Pack-ish enunciation and selling the 70s Presley of "Higher Love" with as much conviction as he can. The fact that those two numbers go over so well is almost entirely due to his talent.

Ditto Opel as Jack's kvetching late mother. She has fun with her second big scene, the secret location in Hawaii where Jack beseeches the gods in the Garden (?) of Disappointed Mothers. It's the sole witty success of the show's set design, with Louizos working well here with the costumes of Brian Hemasath and the hair and wigs of Bettie O. Rogers to amusing effect. Otherwise, Elvis suits may appeal to audiences but that's pretty much a slam dunk, isn't it?

The set really is a mess, starting with Opel's first scene. We've got sliding screens that represented Brooklyn onstage. But now there's a tiny little sign meant to indicate the tony sophistication of Tiffany's. And then there's a semi-hidden hospital bed for the flashback to his mom's dying wish. They're all on the stage at the same time, competing with one another, looking horribly ugly and making no sense whatsoever. The glitz of Vegas is barely represented (mainly, all you get is more wood and stone) and Hawaii isn't evoked in the least.

Worse are some risible, Asian caricatures. Mahi (Catherine Ricafort) is meant to be silly as she tries to seduce Jack into some "Friki-Friki" but her character's cardboard nature remains as one-note as her pidgin-English, despite Ricafort's best efforts. The same goes for other Asian actors, who are forced to mug in painful fashion when seeing sexy Vegas showgirls.

The banal choreography bottoms out in Act One's forgettable finale "Do Something," where Jack inexplicably does some calisthenics. I mean, I get it, he needs to man up and do something about the love of his life being wooed by a thuggish millionaire, but is this really the time for some push-ups? In Act Two, the opener veers from some lazy faux hula dancing to having the actors join hands and do a snake-like wave, for no particular reason.

Perhaps the biggest dance number belongs to Danza. As Tommy, he gets a solo spot to show off his soft shoe ability. He's pleasant enough, but the number reveals nothing about Tommy that we don't already know, especially since he's dancing it alone. Does it reveal his underlying steeliness or the struggle between his sweet nature and blood-thirsty ways? Does he wow Betsy, which at least would have given his dancing some motivation? No, he just sort of shuffles around and is done.

That's the main problem with Danza, who is woefully miscast as Tommy. In the film, James Caan conjures up menace with a thin, unnerving smile and a stare held just a beat too long. Would that man kill you if you proved an inconvenience? Most definitely. Danza, on the other hand, is a pussycat through and through. There's a reason he rose to fame on *Taxi* as a boxer who got knocked out so often he had his license to fight taken away. The danger that should trail Tommy like cheap cologne is entirely missing here. Danza would be a lot more convincing as the befuddled Jack, actually, and that absence of any real threat leaves the show tension-free and lacking in excitement.

So does the score by Tony winner Jason Robert Brown. Best known for more serious fare like *Parade* and *The Last Five Years*, he's stepped up to the plate with a stab at classic Broadway a la *Guys & Dolls*. He's got it in him: the few numbers that click have some pop. "When You Say Vegas" should be a pleasing minor number in a better show, not a stand-out. But at least it stands out. "I Love Betsy" has a Porter-esque flair at name-checking cultural touchstones of the moment like Shake Shack. "Airport Song" is a cute jab at the nightmare of booking a flight. And if it didn't have the icky stereotypes underlying it, "Friki-Friki" could be cute too. But that leaves a lot of songs in the 20 tune score that don't work, like Tommy's forced humor in "Out Of The Sun." You're in big trouble when the finales to both Act One and Act Two fall flat.

But then there's "You Make The Wait Worthwhile," a romantic number sung by Danza and then O'Malley. He strums on a ukulele and sings a tune Betsy insists she loves. It isn't easy to create a new tune that sounds like an old classic, but that's exactly what Brown does here. Danza has a thin but pleasant voice (especially in a lower register and when singing in a conversational style) and he's at his best here. Then O'Malley (who's had nothing to do but register the tired old joke of a single gal desperate to tie the knot) gets to play drunk and sing it a tad too emphatically. It's funny and sweet and romantic. You actually believe these two might be falling in love.

Four pretty good numbers and one delight is a very good start. (So is the swinging orchestra highlighted by drummer/percussionist Jamie Eblen and the Billy May-worthy orchestrations of Don Sebesky.) But *Honeymoon In Vegas* needs a much stronger lineup of 15 other songs to go with those five, a completely redesigned set, new choreography and new casting for Tommy to put some menace into this mensch of a gangster. (I half expected him to shower them with money at the end as a wedding gift.) A much tighter book, wouldn't hurt either, with maybe Jofesberg getting to play two or three more characters with verve to make his turn a show-stopper and fleshing out the food fetish of Tommy's sidekick Johnny Sandwich so he's more than an anonymous presence.

Why two and a half stars with all these complaints? Because that's exactly what a genial piece like *Honeymoon In Vegas* inspires. Light entertainment requires a lot of heavy lifting, but there's enough modest charm here to make the work worthwhile.

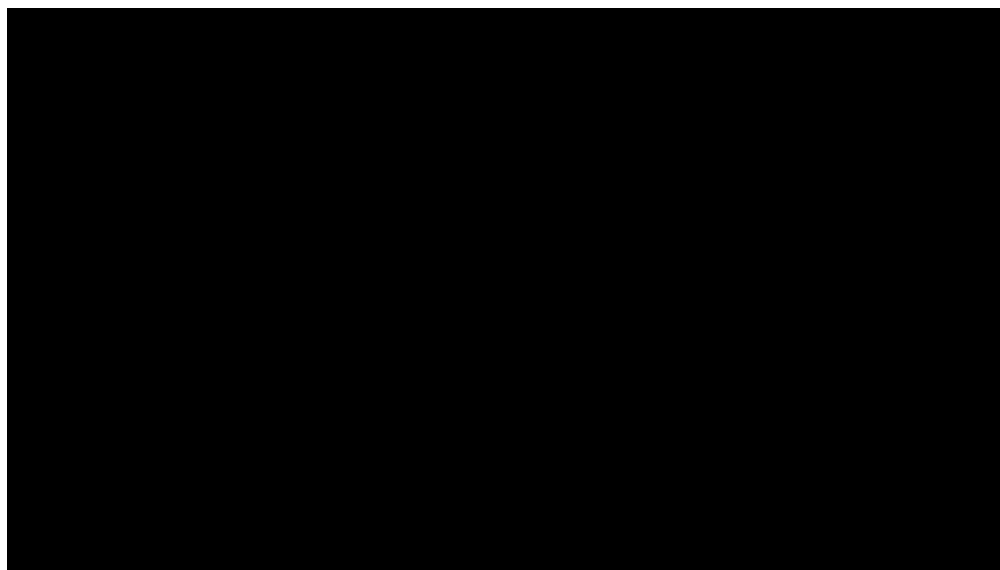
BRONX BOMBERS * 1/2 out of ****

PRIMARY STAGES AT DUKE ON 42ND ST.

As a Yankee fan with season tickets in the bleachers, I'm sorry to say that the Yankees are losers not once but twice this October. First by failing to get to the post-season. Second, by having that indignity compounded with this thin excuse for a misty-eyed tribute to the pinstripes. The glory days seem further and further in the past and *Bronx Bombers* brings that home in painful fashion.

I'm all for combining theater and sports, but playwright Eric Simonson seems to be going backwards. He began with *Lombardi*, a modest tale of the famed football coach that had a solid central performance and a hokey but traditional bio-play structure. It wasn't good, but it wasn't bad and you can imagine guys who don't normally head to Broadway gladly checking it out. Then came the less convincing *Magic/Bird* about one of the great rivalries/friendships in basketball history as illuminated in part by them filming a TV commercial

Now comes *Bronx Bombers*, a forced bit of whimsy that degenerates into the theatrical equivalent of fantasy baseball. Or rather, fantasy baseball if you compiled your dream team but then didn't bother to see how they stacked up to the teams built by your friends. Here, Simonson brings together Yankee greats for a dinner party so lacking in purpose that you get bored before the party's over. Bored! With Ruth and Reggie trading jibes alongside DiMaggio and Jeter? That's magic of an altogether depressing sort.



At least it begins with the semblance of drama. It's 1977 and volatile manager Billy Martin (Keith Nobbs) has yanked Reggie Jackson (Francois Battiste in the night's best performance) from the field in the middle of an inning, creating a firestorm of publicity for the Bronx Zoo. Yogi Berra (Richard Topol) arranges a meeting to cool tempers and calls in Thurman Munson (Bill Dawes) as the Captain to help broker a cease fire. Well, alright. That feels like the beginning of a play.

The real Reggie Jackson might dispute some of the words exchanged but would surely identify with the stage Reggie's desire to not be disrespected. Mind you, fans can identify with Billy's desire to see Reggie hustle after every ball and play with the fire of a Pete Rose. (Maybe Robinson Cano could be enticed to come see the show in between negotiations for his nine figure contract that apparently won't include a "must run hard to first base" clause.)

It's not gripping but it feels like the start of something, just like a runner getting on first thanks to a little dumb luck rather than a well-hit ball. But that's where the feeling ends. Yogi is an exhausting character who can't say "good morning" without offering up a Yogi-ism. A little of that goes a very long way and would be a lot funnier if it was used to highlight his quirky wisdom rather than as a punch line to his every thought. Anyway, Yogi goes home to his long-suffering wife (Wendy Makkena), falls asleep and dreams about a magical dinner party in which Yankee greats all arrive.

Why do they arrive? To offer Yogi some sage advice about managing and what it means to be a Yankee? Not really. They just sit around, air old beefs and trade banal war stories. What can C.J. Wilson do with a role like Babe Ruth, who has literally nothing to do but talk loudly and eat and drink a lot? You'd have to be a real sucker for baseball nostalgia to get moved at the mere sight of actors pretending to be Lou Gehrig (a very handsome John Wernke in an appealing turn) and Derek Jeter (Christopher Jackson) and Mickey Mantle (Dawes again) all in one room together.

The scene goes on and on but it's quickly apparent that it serves absolutely no purpose whatsoever. They just sit around and gab for a while and even diehard fans like myself will soon grow bored. (You'll get moved more quickly by playing that James Earl Jones speech from *Field Of Dreams* and you'll laugh a lot more by dialing up any moment from *Bull Durham*.) After Yogi wakes up, we jump ahead three decades to the closing of Yankee Stadium where Jeter makes a speech and then the show is over. In case you hadn't noticed, none of these three scenes have much to do with each other.

It's a shapeless mess and Simonson the director does no better than Simonson the writer. Two modest touches show their hearts were in the right place. Theatrical vet and Yankees broadcaster Suzyn Waldman offers up the pre-show warning about cell phones. And after the show is over they play "Theme From *New York, New York*" just like they do after every game at the Stadium. Unfortunately, it should have been the version by Liza Minnelli.

THE THEATER OF 2013 (on a four star scale)

The Other Place ** 1/2
Picnic * 1/2
Opus No. 7 ** 1/2
Deceit * 1/2
Life And Times Episodes 1-4 **
Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (w Scarlett Johansson) * 1/2
The Jammer ***
Blood Play ** 1/2
Manilow On Broadway ** 1/2
Women Of Will ** 1/2
All In The Timing ***
Isaac's Eye ***
Bunnica: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery ** 1/2
The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County * 1/2
Much Ado About Nothing ***
Really Really *
Parsifal at the Met *** 1/2
The Madrid * 1/2
The Wild Bride at St. Ann's ** 1/2
Passion at CSC *** 1/2
Carousel at Lincoln Center ***
The Revisionist **
Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella ***
Rock Of Ages * 1/2
Ann ** 1/2
Old Hats ***
The Flick ***
Detroit '67 ** 1/2
Howling Hilda reading * (Mary Testa ***)
Hit The Wall *
Breakfast At Tiffany's * 1/2
The Mound Builders at Signature *
Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike *** 1/2
Cirque Du Soleil's Totem ***
The Lying Lesson * 1/2
Hands On A Hardbody *
Kinky Boots **
Matilda The Musical *** 1/2
The Rascals: Once Upon A Dream ***
Motown: The Musical **
La Ruta ** 1/2
The Big Knife *
The Nance ***
The Assembled Parties ** 1/2
Jekyll & Hyde * 1/2
Thoroughly Modern Millie ** 1/2
Macbeth w Alan Cumming *
Orphans ** 1/2
The Testament Of Mary ** 1/2
The Drawer Boy **
The Trip To Bountiful ***
I'll Eat You Last ** 1/2
Pippin *
This Side Of Neverland ***
A Public Reading Of An Unproduced Screenplay About The Death Of Walt Disney ***
Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 ***
Colin Quinn Unconstitutional ** 1/2
A Family For All Occasions *

The Weir *** 1/2
Disney's The Little Mermaid **
Far From Heaven **
The Caucasian Chalk Circle **
Somewhere Fun **
Venice no stars
Reasons To Be Happy **
STePz *** 1/2
The Comedy of Errors (Shakespeare In The Park) ***
Roadkill ** 1/2
Forever Tango ***
Monkey: Journey To The West ** 1/2
The Civilians: Be The Death Of Me ***
NYMF: Swiss Family Robinson **
NYMF: Dizzy Miss Lizzie's Roadside Revue Presents The Brontes * 1/2
NYMF: Mata Hari in 8 Bullets ***
NYMF: Life Could Be A Dream **
NYMF: Mother Divine **
NYMF: Julian Po ** 1/2
NYMF: Marry Harry **
NYMF: Gary Goldfarb: Master Escapist ** 1/2
NYMF: Castle Walk ***
NYMF: Crossing Swords ***
NYMF: Bend In The Road *** 1/2
NYMF: Homo The Musical no stars
NYMF: Volleygirls *** 1/2
Murder For Two **
Let it Be **
The Cheaters Club *
All The Faces Of The Moon *
Women Or Nothing ** 1/2
Mr. Burns, A Post-Electric Play * 1/2
You Never Can Tell ***
Romeo And Juliet *
Arguendo **
August Wilson's American Century Cycle ****
The Glass Menagerie ** 1/2
Lady Day * 1/2
Julius Caesar at St. Ann's Warehouse ****
Honeymoon In Vegas: The Musical ** 1/2
Bronx Bombers * 1/2

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.

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